



# *No Compassion*

Believers should celebrate God's grace being extended to all people.

## **JONAH 4:1-11**

As believers in Christ, we realize we are sinners and have been saved by grace through faith. But let's be honest. We can be prone to think that some people deserve heaven while others deserve hell. In truth, apart from the mercy and grace of God, all of us are deserving of God's wrathful judgment. Therefore, as we celebrate God's grace being extended to us, we also should celebrate God's grace being extended to all people.

**What are the pros and cons of knowing that God extends grace to all people? What attitudes surface when grace is extended to someone we believe to be undeserving?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **JONAH 3:1-4:11**

When God called Jonah to go and preach to the people of Nineveh, Israel's enemies, the prophet boarded a ship and sailed in the opposite direction. He may have run from his calling, but he could not get away from God. After three days and nights in the belly of a fish, Jonah was in position to receive God's call a second time. This time, Jonah obeyed. He went to Nineveh and proclaimed God's word to its people (Jonah 3:1-4).

When the people of Nineveh heard Jonah's message, they believed God (3:5). When the king heard the message, he commanded everyone to be covered with sackcloth as an expression of repentance before the Lord, hoping He would cancel the coming judgment (3:7-9). Consistent with God's character, when they repented and turned away from their evil ways, He refrained from bringing upon them the disaster He had declared through Jonah (3:10).

Jonah was angry when he witnessed the Lord's compassion on the Ninevites. Jonah then revealed the reason he did not want to go to Nineveh in the first place. It was because he feared this would happen. He would rather have died than to witness God's showing compassion to these people. So he asked the Lord to take his life (4:1-4). Using a plant, a worm, and a scorching wind, the Lord showed Jonah his self-centeredness. In contrast, God revealed His concern and compassion for unbelievers like those in Nineveh (4:5-11).

God had chosen Jonah and His people Israel to be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:1-3; 18:17-19). Like Jonah, the people of God were content to be the recipients of the Lord's kindness but did not want to see Him extend His compassion to others. The book of Jonah was not only a rebuke to the prophet Jonah, but also a rebuke to all God's people who forget God's missionary purpose in calling others to be His.

**As you read Jonah 4:1-11, note the contrast between Jonah and God. How does the contrast point to humanity's failure to understand all people carrying the image of God?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## CONTEMPT (JONAH 4:1-4)

<sup>1</sup> Jonah was greatly displeased and became furious. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the LORD, “Please, LORD, isn’t this what I said while I was still in my own country? That’s why I fled toward Tarshish in the first place. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love, and one who relents from sending disaster. <sup>3</sup> And now, LORD, take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” <sup>4</sup> The LORD asked, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

### VERSES 1-2

Chapter 4 begins with Jonah’s reaction to God’s grace. Ironically, God was pleased with the Assyrians, but Jonah was *displeased* with God. Some believe Jonah was guilty of narrow-minded nationalism. He loved country more than the kingdom of God, and he overlooked the fact that God loved the other nations also. Others think Jonah saw the threat of the Assyrians toward Israel and was upset that the nation would be spared when they were so close to destruction. Some think that Jonah’s reputation was at stake. He had preached a message of destruction, but the destruction never came. That made him look like a false prophet in the eyes of many (Deut. 18:21-22). Some see it as sour grapes because Assyria, not Israel, responded to his preaching.

Verse 2 explains that Jonah knew God was *gracious and compassionate*. He knew what the Scripture revealed about God (Ex. 34:6-7). Ironically, Jonah was grateful for God’s grace in the belly of the fish but not so grateful when God extended His grace to Israel’s enemies. The prophet’s prayer in verse 2 is much different than his prayer from the fish’s belly in chapter 2. Notice all the “I’s” and “me’s” in Jonah’s prayer. It was a selfish prayer.

**How can self-centeredness and prejudices get in the way of a believer being used of God?**

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## VERSES 3-4

In a moment of self-pity and disgust, Jonah prayed for the Lord to take his life. Earlier, he had prayed for God to save his life (2:7). In a much less threatening situation in chapter 4, he prayed for God to take his life. In a moment of weakness and self-pity, Elijah had prayed a similar prayer (1 Kings 19:4). While God answered Jonah's prayer to save him from the fish, He did not answer the prayer to take his life. Sometimes an unanswered prayer is a blessing.

In verse 4, the Lord responded to Jonah's prayer with a question. He asked if it was *right* for Jonah *to be angry*. Since inflection and expression cannot be determined from the text, we cannot be sure exactly how the Lord spoke those words. Did He do so as a rebuke to Jonah with disdain and disgust toward the prophet? *Why are you so angry after all I've done for you?* Did the Lord ask that question with a matter-of-fact, teaching tone—*Let's examine this and see if it is right for you to be angry*. Either way, the question was probing and rhetorical. Jonah offered no response because no response was needed. His anger was unjustified and inappropriate. Jonah was callous to the heart of God and to the lives of the Assyrians.

**How can prejudices lead to bitterness and anger toward God?**

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## ANGER (JONAH 4:5-9)

<sup>5</sup> Jonah left the city and found a place east of it. He made himself a shelter there and sat in its shade to see what would happen to the city. <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD God appointed a plant, and it grew over Jonah to provide shade for his head to rescue him from his trouble. Jonah was greatly pleased with the plant. <sup>7</sup> When dawn came the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, and it withered. <sup>8</sup> As the sun was rising, God appointed a scorching east wind. The sun beat down on Jonah's head so much that he almost fainted, and he wanted to die. He said, "It's better for me to die than to live." <sup>9</sup> Then God asked Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "Yes, it's right!" he replied. "I'm angry enough to die!"



## VERSE 5

While Jonah didn't care for the well-being of the Assyrians, he demonstrated a concern for his own comfort. In response to the Lord's questioning of his anger and bitterness, he didn't answer with words. Instead, he *left the city and found a place east of it*. He found a spot overlooking the city to hopefully see its destruction. Jonah's actions were almost defiant toward the Lord.

Because the temperature in that area can reach 110 degrees Fahrenheit, Jonah moved into the mode of self-care. He *made himself a shelter there and sat in its shade*. This was a temporary solution, but the Lord would provide an even better one for the pouting prophet.

## VERSES 6-8

The Lord, in a marvelous act of grace toward the prophet, *appointed a plant* that grew over Jonah and provided shade for him. Some believe this plant to be the castor-oil plant with its big leaves, common in that area. Others think it was a climbing gourd that may have covered the booth. The shade this plant provided did something nothing else could do in the story of Jonah: he was *greatly pleased* with the plant. This marks the first time in the story that Jonah is happy. He comfortably sat on the hillside, hoping to see God change His mind about sparing the Assyrians, or possibly hoping that the Assyrians' repentance was not sincere.

**Why does anger blind a person to misguided priorities and hypocrisy?**

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The same God who appointed the plant *appointed a worm that attacked the plant*. Why would God provide the plant only to have it taken away by the worm? Obviously, God cared more about Jonah's spiritual condition than his physical comfort. He wanted Jonah to recognize that his anger was unjustified, and that his bitterness toward God and the Assyrians was affecting him. Jonah was blinded to what should have been his priorities and was acting hypocritically by obsessing over his own physical comfort. Again, verse 7 emphasizes how God was in control of this narrative. He appointed the fish, the plant, and the worm.

In verse 8, God had one more appointment for Jonah. He *appointed a scorching east wind*. This is a phenomenon in that region known as a sirocco, which can quickly raise the temperature by as much as 20 degrees Fahrenheit. The *sun* fell directly on Jonah, and again he called out to die: *It's better for me to die than to live*. Jonah continued to hold fast to self-justification and anger toward the Assyrians.

#### VERSE 9

For the second time in the narrative, God asked Jonah a penetrating question. The first question was whether his anger toward the Assyrians' being spared from judgment was right (v. 4). Now God asked if his anger about the plant dying was justified. When people are hot, tired, and thirsty, frustration and anger often grow more intense. The prophet declared: *Yes it's right*. Jonah was so sure Assyria did not deserve God's grace that he was blinded to his own self-centeredness, even when God revealed it to him through the plant and the scorching east wind. This set the stage for God to show Jonah what compassion was all about.

**What are some of the ways that anger and bitterness can blind us to the spiritual needs of others?**

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#### **KEY DOCTRINE:** *Evangelism and Missions*

It is the duty and privilege of every follower of Christ and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to endeavor to make disciples of all nations. (See Genesis 12:3; Matthew 28:18-20.)

#### **COMPASSION** (JONAH 4:10-11)

<sup>10</sup> **And the LORD said, "You cared about the plant, which you did not labor over and did not grow. It appeared in a night and perished in a night."** <sup>11</sup> **So may I not care about the great city of Nineveh, which has more than a hundred twenty thousand people**



who cannot distinguish between their right and their left, as well as many animals?”

#### VERSE 10

Jonah’s emotional outburst in answer to God’s question about his anger and bitterness provided a tremendous object lesson. The prophet *cared about the plant* that had grown up to cover him during the heat. He didn’t work to plant it, water it, or tend it. It was a gift of God’s grace. Jonah cared more about this plant than he cared about the people of Nineveh created in the image of God. How could Jonah’s priorities have been so skewed? He seemed to care only for himself, or at best only for the nation of Israel.

The word for *cared* in Hebrew is a word that describes compassion. It involved deep feeling and emotion. Jonah expressed deep emotion toward what should have evoked the least amount of care—the plant! Christians can likewise become so concerned about their own safety, comfort, and well-being that they do not prioritize those who do not have a relationship with Christ. God’s calling is not only a privilege but also a responsibility to take the gospel to those who have not heard it.

***Would Jonah care more about gourds or souls?***

#### VERSE 11

Jonah was concerned for the vine; God was concerned for the people. For the third time in this passage God asked the prophet a question—*So may I not care about the great city of Nineveh?* God’s priorities were people. He said the city had *more than hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot distinguish between their right and their left*. Though some have suggested that this indicated 120,000 children, archaeology suggests Nineveh would not have supported a population large enough to include that many children. The archaeological site of ancient Nineveh would support up to 175,000 people. Therefore, the reference that they did not know their right from their left is a reference to those who were spiritually, ethically, and morally naïve. Jonah needed to preach to Nineveh because the people of that city had never heard the message of repentance and faith in the God of the Hebrews.

To further highlight the absurdity of Jonah's anger and bitterness, the Lord added: *as well as many animals*. If Jonah could not care for the people of Nineveh, could he not at least care about the livestock in the city? Weren't they more important than a vine that grew up overnight and perished? Jonah should have had compassion on all of God's creation. If he cared for a plant, certainly he should have cared for the people and the animals in Nineveh. Would Jonah care more about gourds or souls?

The story of Jonah ends abruptly. We do not know because of the prophet. Perhaps it ends where it does because Jonah's story has now become our story?

**How can believers show compassion to those from other cultures who have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ?**

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.*

Read the following verses: Genesis 12:1-3; Psalm 72:17; Isaiah 43:8-13; Matthew 28:19-20; Galatians 3:8. Note what these verses have to say about God's concern for the nations. What do they reveal about God's purposes for believers in relationship to the nations? How would you summarize the teaching of these passages in one sentence?

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers should examine their lives for prejudices that get in their way of fulfilling God's redemption.
- Selfish anger leads to despair and misguided priorities.
- Believers are to demonstrate godly compassion to all people.

**Discuss specific ways your class can celebrate God's grace being extended to all people. How can the group be more open to guests and others who are not a part of a Bible study group? What actions might the group need to take to reach out to others in the community?**

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**What are some of the greatest prejudices you face in taking the gospel to those who are not like you? Ask God to help you overcome those prejudices and look for ways to share the gospel joyfully with all people.**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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